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ABSTRACT

Neither public nor private agencies address the extensive religious involvement that children and youth receive in child care facilities and foster home placement situations. In a five-state mid-west study (N=252), this paper examines religious practices in foster homes. The study identifies a strong Christian-based affiliation of foster homes. The findings illustrate the daily, weekly, and monthly religious rituals practiced in foster homes including grace at meals, bedtime prayers, church-going, and religious social groups activities. These activities complement the process of moral development in children through religious involvement. The pervasiveness of religious practices and beliefs as reported suggests that even when both parents of these out-of-home children do not stipulate a preference for a specific religiously-affiliated foster home, the experience of the foster child will probably include practices and education in a specific religious persuasion. Though foster parents generally state that they allow the child to choose to be involved in the religious activities of the home, anecdotal evidence exists to suggest that while some children gain a great deal from involvement in the religious practices of the foster home, other foster children have experienced both confusion and rejection due to the demands by foster parents to be involved in religious activities. Child-serving agencies and government social services should take heed that foster parents are of the opinion that the issues of religion and religious involvement of foster children is not adequately addressed by agencies at orientation and placement. In this study, only two states had any training in this area. (Contains 6 tables and 15 references). (Author/MKA)

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From Moral Development to Healthy Relationships: The Role of Religion in Out-of-Home Placement

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Mona S. Schatz, DSW, Associate Professor, Social Work Department, Colorado State University, Director, Education and Research Institute for Fostering Families, a comprehensive child welfare training, and Coordinator, Nonprofit Agency Administration Interdisciplinary Studies Program. Primary areas of practice expertise include (1) social work practice with children and families, (2) social work theoretical development in generalist perspective at initial and advanced levels, (3) social work education and field education in social work, (4) child and adolescent development and attachment disorders, and (5) social welfare policy analysis. Areas of practice since 1972 include children and family services, youth work, non-profit agency management and administration, home health care, and private consultation. Specific roles have included direct service practitioner, trainer, specialist in organization and program development, needs assessment, policy development, direct client intervention, community and regional organizing, planning and management (including retrenchment management), consultation, community education, grant development, and administration in various arenas including child welfare, mental health, health planning, home health care, and the voluntary sector. Recent consultation areas include local government strategic planning, international multi-cultural training, exploration of social welfare policies, and social work educational consultation in Central and East Europe, Russia.

Charles R. Horejsi, Ph.D., Professor at the University of Montana, Department of Social Work, provides valuable consultation to Fostering Families. Dr. Horejsi is nationally recognized for his many articles in the field of child welfare and his texts which include Foster Family Care (1979). Dr. Horejsi has trained family and child welfare professionals in Montana as well as nationally.

ABSTRACT

Neither public nor private agencies address the extensive religious involvement that children and youth receive in child care facilities and foster home placement situations. In a 5-state mid-west study, the authors examine religious practices in foster homes. The study identifies a strong Christian-based affiliation of foster homes. The findings illustrate the daily, weekly, and monthly religious rituals practiced in foster homes including grace at meals, bedtime prayers, church-going, and religious social group activities. These activities complement the process of moral development in children through religious involvement. The pervasiveness of religious practices and beliefs as reported suggests that even when birth parents of these out-of-home children do not stipulate a preference for a specific religiously-affiliated foster home, the experience of the foster child will probably include practices and education in a specific religious persuasion.

Though foster parents generally state that they allow the child to choose to be involved in the religious activities of the home, anecdotal evidence exists to suggest that while some children gain a great deal from involvement in the religious practices of the foster home, other foster children have experienced both confusion and rejection due to the demands by foster parents to be involved in religious activities. Child-serving agencies and government social services should take heed that foster parents are of the opinion that the issues of religion and religious involvement of foster children is not adequately addressed by agencies at orientation and placement. In the study, only two states had any training in this area.

Let me say too that many of you may be unsure of what this presentation and paper will be about, or ambivalent to spend very valuable limited time listening to a talk or reading about religion at a child abuse and neglect conference. Recognizing these feelings, I hope you will be pleased with the diversity of the content as this discussion progresses. This work promises to not take any theological or dogmatic premises. Interestingly, both from material already published by the authors and from emerging social science research, recognition is growing regarding the importance of addressing religion and spirituality in human services practice. New research addressing spirituality in client assessment suggests that the concept of spirituality must be given greater attention in regulatory agencies among other types of social services (Dudley/Smith/Millison, (1995).

Today I hope I succeed in introducing ideas for each of you related to this provocative area of research and practice. As I proceed, I will recount how I became involved in this area, I will provide some results from recent research in this area of religion in foster care and embed this discussion in a stance of a very exploratory, beginning look at a rather large area of focus

Context - Some Events in Current Political Arena

We are living in interesting political times. In the broadest context, the 1996 Presidential primaries have provided a wide expanse of American public opinions including opinions and challenges from varied religious groups-left, middle and right. We also have a new resurgence of interest in religious education, training, and daily family practices for families and children. Last week, with President Clinton's support, Congress passed legislation on adoption tax credits. This legislation also mandates adoption proceed as quickly as possible, not holding up adoption decisions due to a child's cultural or racial

background. Our recognition of the relationship between social-cultural background, self-esteem, and positive personal growth is being eroded by political agendas.

Context- Ethnic-Cultural Perspective: Cultural Approach to considering religion

Though Americans often address cultural diversity from an ethnic-cultural perspective; we would do much better if we address America's diverse nature by examining American's affiliation in ethnic *and* in the vast number of religious affiliations--religious groups that often encompass ethnic and cultural realities. Further, many Americans do not belong to any religious organizations, yet, "in poll after poll, Americans affirm that they believe in G-d. The percentage of Americans who affirm some type of belief consistently rises above 90 percent (Wolpe, 1993, p. 4)." Though we carefully avoid discussions of religion in public settings, privately, most people have a great many thoughts and ideas about G-d, religion, spirituality, rituals, etc.

Context: The "Civic Culture"

We as Americans have created what has been termed a "civic culture" based on the idea that all Americans "are eligible to participate in public life as equals, [irregardless of religious affiliation],... and, as good citizens of the civic culture are free to differ from each other in religion and other aspects of our private lives (Fuchs, 1990, p. 5). Actually, we as Americans live a myth of separateness-- our work life and our spiritual life can live in wholly different spheres of our daily existence. On Sabbath's, we pray in our churches and temples. On workdays, we walk out our door and live out a seemingly "non-secular" lifestyle in work settings, etc. It is a more accurate contention to suggest that the role of religion in families is analogous to the role of culture in families.

For the foster care home, the group home, or other types of residential settings, we often tend to present this non-secular lifestyle professionally, yet, "after hours" the children are invited or more often expected to participate in and practice religious behaviors and traditions as they embrace the daily familial life of the home. So immediately we see how complicated this topic becomes, depending on whose view we use to explore the issue.

Families and Religious Choice

In the United States, it is the right of families to chose their religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. Very often, a family's religious choice is rooted their cultural heritage, their community, their education and upbringing. Even when children and youth are placed in out-of home care, it is recognized that one of the residual rights of the parents or guardian(s) is their right to the choice of the child's religious affiliation (Colorado Revised Statute 19-3-10(2). Parents may request their child's continuance in regular religious practices familiar to the child including continued affiliation in their religious group. Though this may not occur in an emergency placement situation, within days of an emergency placement, an agency is required to accommodate specific religious activities such as prayer, worship, educational programs, etc. along with family expectations related to food preferences, dress, etc. that sustain the child's observance of their religion.

A Family's Choice for "No Religious Affiliation"

On the other hand, there appear to be a significant number of children and youth who enter group or fostering situations with no family religious affiliation. The question of whether a child care facility has the right to impose religious practices and organizational affiliation does not appear to be clear. In many cases, the authors have learned, a child or youth may

become involved in the religious practices and affiliations of a child care residential facility by either not objecting to participate in religious practices, or by simply taking on certain rituals in the environment, or through their ability to adapt to the daily patterns and observances of the facility.

Gaining direction for studying Religion and Foster Care/Out of home Care

Let me indicate briefly how Dr. Horejsi and I became involved in this topic. Besides Dr. Horejsi's long commitment to studying and working in the field of foster care, he works with the Native American people in Montana. He indicates in a text he wrote how difficult it is for the Anglo community to understand the impact of our lack of recognition of the Native American's religious lifestyle. He says

> Religion is very important to the Indian, yet, his/her spiritual beliefs and values are difficult for the Anglo to grasp because American Indian religion is interrelated and interwoven with all of life (Horejsi (1979), p. 246.)

Out of our working relationship through the Institute for Fostering Families at Colorado State, Dr. Horejsi and I developed a unique training entitled Religion and the Foster Home (Schatz and Horejsi, 1992)[1]. It is more as a facilitative vehicle than a "facts and figures" training. Child protection caseworkers, out-of-care foster parents, group home workers and parents, and related professionals discuss how religious practices in foster and other out-of-home settings may impact children in out of home settings. Over 600 individuals have attended this program in its one-day format. The training program has been well received and highly rated by trainees.

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[1] This training program was developed through the Education and Research Institute for Fostering Families, a comprehensive child welfare training program. Housed in the Social

From time to time, trainees have invited their minister to attend the training as well and this too has been very positive experience. This training program has been described in a recent edition of the Child Welfare journal so I will not dwell on the program.

Some Early Lessons from the Training Program

What we learned from the many opportunities to deliver this training program is how complex this issue is depending on whose lens is being used, depending on whose needs are being served. Yet, most significant, we learned that foster parents will not give up their regular religious practices when fostering children. In fact, foster parents often foster children because of their religious beliefs.

At times we learned how problems arise with children and youth who (1) do not want to go to church, (2) want to retain their religious involvement even when they return to their family of origin, and (3) who know they can "get at" foster parents by attacking their religious practices. We also heard about former foster children who indicate difficult experiences because they lived in 4 or 5 foster homes, and each home had very different religious affiliations and expectations. We also learned that some workers have very strong opinions about religion in foster care work. For example, some workers will not use any home that has regular religious practices; while others have no real "opinion," yet they usually stay away from issues of religious practices related to the fostering experience.

The foster care certification worker probably plays the biggest role in addressing religion in the foster home. At initial certification, the worker explores the religious experiences that may be expected. Yet, there is little clarity provided foster parents, as the recent research efforts identified.

Work Department at Colorado State University, this program has been a collaborative effort with the Colorado Department of Human Services.

Law and Regulation: Colorado as an example

During our research efforts, we learned that the direction from law and regulation did not offer a great deal of clarity for how caseworkers should address this issue, nor was there clarity for foster homes or religiously-oriented group residential facilities. States generally have regulations which address issues of religion for out-of-home care facilities (See Chart A as an example of recent standards addressing standards for religion for 24-hour child care facilities in Colorado). Child care facilities must be cognizant of these laws and accompanying regulations. Current regulations provide new direction when discussing this issue. They state that a home or group facility should be sensitive to the child's religious needs. Yet, it goes on to indicate that children can make choices about religious involvement when their family has none. Children can not be forced to participate, yet invited. This language may invite new questions rather than answers!

As the training program revealed, the very legal governmental institutions which workers represented did a poor job addressing this issue. Social services child protection programs and affiliated organizations have responsibility in this arena for setting policies addressing religion in out-of-home care. Then, these public officials hope they can address the day-to-day administrative and practices realities that steer them far afield from these very policies. This is a topic area where we legislate our "hopes" and then cover our eyes so we do not see the difficulties arising from our "legislated and/or regulated hopes.".

Chart A : Regulations in Colorado Addressing Religion for Children in Out-of-home Care

In Colorado, new quality standards for 24-hour child care facilities (Colorado Department of Social Services Staff Manual, Volume 7, 7.714.100) state

I. The facility shall demonstrate consideration for, and sensitivity to, the religious backgrounds of children in care. Facilities shall assist a child's involvement in religious activities appropriate to the child's religious background and based upon the needs and interests of the child.

A. Children in care shall be allowed and encouraged to celebrate their religious holidays.

B. Opportunity and assistance shall be provided for each child to practice the chosen/preferred religious beliefs and father of his/her family. If the family has no preference, the individual preference of the child shall be respected. This includes, but is not limited to, making necessary arrangements for attendance of children at the appropriate religious institution or at a study group for religious instruction.

II. A child may be invited to participate in religious activities of the facility.

III. A child shall not be coerced or forced to participate in the religious activities of the facility or to attend religious services.

IV. Prior to placement of the child at the facility, the parent(s), guardian(s), and/or the placing agencies must be notified of the practices, philosophy, and affiliation of the facility.

V. Any form of religious intervention used by the facility to control or change a child's behavior, or treat or heal a medical condition, must be approved, in writing, by the legal guardian(s) of the child prior to the use of the intervention.

VI. A facility can not deny medical care to a child because of religious beliefs.

Finally, the document ends with the sentence: The child's family and/or guardian must be consulted prior to any planned change in religious affiliation made by the child while he/she is in care at the facility.

Purpose of Research

Dr. Horejsi and I developed and implemented a 5-state study of foster homes. Two questions guided much of the inquiry undertaken. First, how do the religious beliefs and practices of fostering parents relate to their motivation to foster other children and carry out

their parenting functions? Second, how does a child in placement respond to the religious influences of the fostering home setting?

By developing a research study, we sought to simply document the prevalence of regular religious practices in foster homes such as prayers at meals, church attendance, etc. . An agency in Minnesota, a CPA, offered to be involved in the study, and, provided names for survey purposes.

Some of the impetus for this exploration arises from the need to learn more about the placement experience of children and youth in care and to understand how children adjust to their placement setting. In some cases, it is known that children and youth find themselves in out-of-home placement settings that is very different from their own, because of religious culture, ethnic culture, or nationality.

The study sought to examine how well foster homes were prepared by licensing agencies around religious issues and also to identify any situations where religious practices became difficult or problematic in the foster home.

Over 250 foster home responded to a 6-page survey asking a variety of questions including questions about whether religious beliefs and values influenced their motivation to foster, whether they were adequately screened and trained with regard to religious issues, and, then, a series of questions asked about the regularity of religious practices in foster homes, and the influence of religious beliefs and practices on parenting foster children.

The results of this study provide a beginning basis for us to discuss how we should address this issue with foster children at placement, during placement moves, and equally important, at any point in the process of family visitation/connection, and family reunification. From the results, we hoped to consider:

a) the extent of religious practices in foster homes and what impact, if any, these practices have on a foster child
b) how foster children are involved in religious activities and who decides if foster children want to participate in specific rituals
c) whether there are any potential concerns related to the religious practices and ultimately to the rights of foster children and their birth parents to maintain their own religious practices, including the practice of no religion in the home
d) the responsibilities, roles and/or functions of the licensing agency and the workers in this area, including screening and training procedures which address religious practices and issues which foster homes and foster children may encounter.

Methodology

Using a random selection process, over 600 surveys were sent to foster homes in five states: Colorado, Wisconsin, North Dakota, Montana, and Minnesota. The foster parents were selected through two primary sources: a private child placement agency in the mid-west who asked to be part of the study, and, a pool of foster parents in Colorado. At present, 252 surveys have been tabulated (42% response rate).

A five-page survey instrument asked foster homes to identify both religious practices in their homes, in their religious community, and how they involved foster children in religious experiences.

Sample

A total of 238 respondents identified their type of license. Of these, 29% (73) were licensed by a public agency; 68% (167) were licensed by a private agency. The breakdown of respondents by state is listed in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1

Foster Homes by State of Residence and Status

N=238

State	Public	Private	Total
Colorado	56 (67%)	28 (33%)	84
Minnesota	3 (3%)	96 (97%)	99
Montana	5 (17%)	1 (83%)	6
North Dakota	8 (18%)	36 (82%)	44
Wisconsin	0 (0%)	5 (100%)	5

Foster families in this study reside in communities ranging in size from rural farm communities (22% or 56), to tribal areas (2% or 5), small towns under 50,000 (31% or 77), city/suburban areas over 50,000 (24% or 60), and urban/metro areas over 500,000 (18% or 44).

The number of years respondents have been in foster care is shown in Table 2 as follows:

Table 2 Number of years as licensed/certified foster home N=247	
Categories	**Number (%)**
Under one year	19 (7.5%)
1-3 years	82 (32.6%)
4-6 years	60 (23.8%)
7-9 years	29 (11.5%)
10-12 years	21 (8.3%)
13-15 years	12 (4.8%)
Over 16 years	24 (9.5%)

Two-parent foster homes comprised 60.4% (196) of the respondent pool; 20.6% (51) were single-parent foster homes.

The religious affiliation 220 respondents was identified as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Religious Affiliation of Foster Home Respondents N=220 (Note: Optional Item on Survey)	
Denomination	Number (%)
Baptist	18 (7%)
Catholic	52 (21%)
Christian non-denominational	30 (12%)
Lutheran	42 (17%)
Pentecostal	5 (2%)
Other Christian	64 (26%)
Jewish	1 (4%)
Native American	7 (3%)

Results

A total of 192 (78%) of foster parents reported being influenced by religious beliefs and values to become a foster family. Of this total, 51% (125) responded that their religious beliefs and values motivated them to become a foster family. Another 27% (67) were somewhat motivated by their religious beliefs and values. Those not motivated to become foster homes because of (or through) their religious beliefs and values made up 21% (52) of respondents.

When asked if the foster family expected the foster childto be involved in the family's religious practices, 70% (173) said "yes" or "they hoped the child would but the child would decide." One-fourth (25%) of the respondents (62) believed that they did not expect foster children to adopt the religious practices of the foster home.

When asked about how foster children become acquainted with the foster family's religious practices, 35% (63) of the respondents indicated that they talk to the foster child about their religious practices. Another 32% (58) said that the foster child"watches the family and learns by watching" or "they take the foster child to the church or temple religious education program and s/he learns from the teacher)(s) and the religious services." Most respondents (53% or 130) indicated that there is no established way that a foster child is acquainted with the religious practices of the foster home.

When respondents were asked about the role of the licensing agency in discussing regular religious practices and in addressing the issues of religious practices in training, only 37% (92) felt that adequate review of this area was made in the screening process, and fewer (29% or 70) indicated that adequate review was made in the training program(s). Over 40% of respondents indicated that the topic of religion in foster care was discussed both in screening (109) and training (112) yet they did not select the response choice of "adequate" in the survey.

Between 20% and 30% indicated that no discussion was made about religion in either the screening (45) or training (62) program of the licensing agency.

An array of religious rituals were listed in the survey and respondents were asked to indicate whether they participated in the religious practice on a "daily," "weekly," or "monthly," basis or "not often" or "never." Table 4 shows that 67% (164) of the foster families maintain weekly church/temple attendance with another 24% (61) attending religious services on a monthly or less frequent basis. Morning, evening, and meal prayers were daily practices of many foster homes with daily meal prayers being most frequent, 59% (146) of the respondent group.

Table 4

Frequency of Religious Practices in Foster Home N=252

Religious Practice	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Rarely	Never
Church/temple attendance	41.00%	67.49%	9.88%	14.81%	4.12%
Morning prayers	21.49%	2.48%	1.65%	20.25%	34.30%
Evening prayers	36.73%	3.67%	2.04%	17.14%	22.04%
Meal prayers/grace	58.63%	6.43%	2.41%	16.47%	9.64%
Children religious school	1.62%	59.92%	3.24%	10.93%	16.60%
Adult religious education	.81%	29.84%	8.87%	20.97%	26.61%
Attend religious social activities	.40%	21.77%	27.02%	33.06%	10.48%
Singing/chanting	10.04%	16.87%	2.81%	12.05%	44.58%
Baptism	1.60%	2.14%	2.14%	47.59%	22.46%
Communion	.42%	23.85%	38.49%	15.48%	13.39%
Meditation	6.88%	2.02%	2.43%	10.12%	67.21%
Use of incense or candles	1.20%	1.20%	1.99%	11.16%	71.71%
Home prayer meetings	1.20%	4.40%	3.20%	20.40%	58.00%
Special food preparation based in religious values	.40%	.00%	.40%	8.73%	78.17%
Home nativity/alter	1.28%	.43%	.43%	21.37%	60.68%
Wearing religious symbols or jewelry	6.10%	3.66%	1.63%	23.58^	52.85%
Home prayer meetings	1.20%	4.40%	3.20%	20.40%	58.00%
Fasting rituals	.81%	.00%	2.43%	21.05% %	63.16%
Smudging	1.21%	.40%	.81%	2.02%	79.44%

Asked about regular religious education for foster children such as Sunday School, daily religious schools or Bible Camp, 32% (72) responded affirmatively. Another 42% (93) indicated they would have foster children attend religious education programs "if they want to." Another 6% (13) would do so with parents permission. When asked about regular church or temple attendance 53% (120) indicated they do involve foster children in these services, another 31% (70) involve foster children who want to, and another 4% (9) involve foster children with the permission of parents. Involvement by foster children in church sponsored youth programs is supported by 26% (58) of the foster homes, another 45% (100) involved foster children who want to be involved and 6% (13) involve foster children with parental permission. In Table 5 these three areas are displayed for comparison purposes.

Table 5
Foster Children's Involvement in Religious Practices in Foster Homes
N=252

Religious Activity	Yes	If child wants	W/Parent permission	No
Religious education	72 (32%)	93 (42%)	13 (6%)	43 (19%)
Church attendance	120 (53%)	70 (31%)	9 (4%)	25 (11%)
Church sponsored youth program	58 (26%)	100 (45%)	13 (6%)	46 (21%)

Several major religious holidays get a great deal of public attention in the United States, and therefore, respondents were asked about the involvement of foster children in holidays such as Christmas, Hanukkah, and Easter. Seventy-one percent (165) indicated they do involve foster children in these holidays, another 23% (54) said they would only if the child wanted to, and another 3% (6) indicated they would involve the foster child only if the parents gain permission.

When foster parents were asked whether they had involved their foster children in rituals such as baptism and communion, 71% (177) indicated that foster children have not while 27% (66) indicated they had. Most often foster parents indicated that the child's' participation in communion was "the choice of the child and did not involve (birth) parents", whereas, baptism might involve requesting permission from either the birth parents or the agency caseworker. Some indicated that workers were notified verbally of such classes or attendance at weekly religious classes. In written comment areas, foster parents indicated that birth parents might give permission for involvement in rituals and be involved themselves when possible. One respondent reported that as a foster family they wanted to have a young girl baptized. The foster parent writes,

> "no, the mother [did not give her consent as she] wanted her [daughter] baptized Catholic." The foster parent respondent further writes that "the mom was murdered and they took the child to the mom's church after the funeral and baptized her Catholic."

Foster parents were asked if religious beliefs or practices contributed to restrictions in activities of foster children. From a list of 14 different activities such as drinking alcohol, not attending dances, reading popular novels, movies, television, etc., the most frequently cited restrictions related to use of alcohol and cigarettes, social dances, movies, pop music, war toys

(for younger children), and equally important were the responses indicating restrictions related to use of family planning, contraception, and obtaining an abortion. Responses are presented in Table 6.

Table 6 Restrictions of Foster Homes based in Religious Beliefs and Practices
(N=252)

Activity	Number (%)
Can not drink alcohol/use drugs	133 (53.20%)
Can not smoke cigarettes	99 (39.60%)
Can not play with war toys	38 (15.26%)
Can not obtain an abortion	79 (31.98%)
Can not obtain contraception	24 (9.72%)
Can not use a family planning clinic	20 (8.10%)
Can not listen to pop music	14 (5.67%)
Can not go to dances	11 (4.38%)
Can not go to the movies	9 (3.66%)
Can not watch television	7 (2.83%)
Can not read popular novels	5 (2.00%)
Can not attend public schools	4 (1.60%)

In an open question format, foster parents provided various perceptions of the impact of their religious life-style on foster children. Many respondents indicated that the children placed into their homes "had never been inside a church," or "had no previous religious involvement." Though many different ideas were presented by foster parent respondents, the examples below reveal the tone of these responses. One respondent says

> "We explain why we believe the way that we do and ask them to try it. Even if they did not participate, they must sit and listen quietly as we did."
>
> "We always encourage church attendance, but never force it. We are not bothered if older children don't want to go; young ones we insist."

> "I have been a foster parent for 21 years and have had no child refuse [to attend church]. During preplacement the children are informed that church attendance is a family activity. I would work quickly to resolve the problem; the process that I would use would depend on the situation."

"We have told foster children that they do not have to agree with us--they just have to go along with us."

> "Children placed in our home are done so with the parents knowledge that we are religiously active, and so their children will attend church with our family. However we will teach or encourage them to be baptized."

Foster parents were asked if "specific religious practices or beliefs in their home strongly influenced and guided the way they care for their children and foster children? Sixty-seven percent (67%) indicated affirmatively; only 16% said no. Some consistent responses were seen. These include:

"We believe that providing foster care is a form of ministry to our community. We have been blessed by God with a supportive family situation and feel that this is a way we can "give back" in a meaningful way. We serve the Lord in this way. We respect all children as a blessing from God, a treasure whom we have been entrusted to take care for a period to time."

"We attempt to follow the Ten Commandments and use the Bible as a guide." (Some respondents also include the "golden rule.")

"We have committed our lives to living the way that Jesus Christ would have us live. We want all our children to grow and know true peace and joy that comes only from loving him."

Discussion

From this sample, foster homes reflect a strong Christan-based affiliation spanning many denominations. Further, this study illustrates the influence of religious beliefs and values for foster parents' involvement in fostering. The findings present a portrait of foster homes with diverse religious practices including daily, weekly, and monthly religious activities. As illustrated, nearly two-thirds of these respondent foster families indicate that they say prayers at meals, attend church weekly or monthly, and celebrate annual religious holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Even where families did not indicate regular church attendance, they still indicated involvement for themselves and their foster children in primary holidays such as Christmas and Easter.

Religious Involvement Promotes Moral Development

We must expand the discussion here. We can examine this issue in the framework of moral development. One noted author recently wrote that we want our children to be good. She says

> They must not lie, cheat, or steal, grab one anther's toys, be rude to grown-ups, say mean things to their friends, or hurt people's feelings. They must not kick, hit, or pinch, must not hog the ball on the soccer field, boast of their speed in the steelyard or their quickness in finishing chapter books....
>
> All this we demand of children so that they will become good people--like ourselves only better--their goodness achieving what our virtue and that of our ancestors inexplicably failed to. They will make peace, not war, pay their taxes in full, care for the needy, be fair stewards of the earth (p. 71).

Many Americans think teaching religious practices to children is the best way to insure healthy moral development, and provide a good experience in belonging to a caring community.

Some of the primary roles of religious education (See Wolpe, 1993; Martha Fay, 1993) are to teach children about what is sacred, teaching them specific rules, roles, responsibility, and rituals related to the faith, and the prayers and blessings which provide a vehicle for self-expression with a Supreme Deity, or G-d. Among the benefits of teaching children and youth about a spiritual and religious life is that they may gain an increased sense of self and one's relations with others--seen and unseen, an increased sense of self-esteem emerging from the concept of their specialness. Further, children and youth are provided models for growth and development through the entire life cycle with events such as Confirmations, Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, weddings, funerals, etc.

We should recognize that these reasons for religious education are typical of those offered by foster parents. The involvement of foster children in religious schools, services, etc. is to foster healthy moral development as well as belong to a social community.

Yet, there are probably times, as have been recounted to me, that are difficult for foster children. For example, some foster families *require* foster children to attend child, religious programs, and regular weekday worship groups. These demands are often quite foreign to foster children. Many foster parents indicate that foster children entering their homes have little or not religious affiliation or experience. I will return to this issue later in my discussion. I want to indicate that for children, building health relationships, is a significant outcome of social and moral development, often developed, in part, through religious affiliations and regular involvement in religious education and family and youth programs.

Religious Education and Practices and Moral Development

Yet, what interested me initially, and continues to interest me in part providing a background for this research, is the challenge of foster children who enter into foster homes which have extensive religious cultures. Let me tell you a profound personal example. When I was a foster parent, a designated[2] foster home, in the mid-and late-1970s, my foster daughter was concerned with her future when I died. What she was alluding to her understanding, at age 14, of the story of the Second Coming, wherein the Jewish people would be killed when Christ re-entered the world. As she asked me, with the support of a friend sharing dinner with us, I could only do my best to tell her about how religious teaching may among all sects, yet, some truths exist among all religious teachings. Though this experience was not traumatic, my foster daughter certainly harbored fears which contributed

[2] Designated foster homes are assigned a particular child, usually known to the fostering family.

to her unsteady feelings, at the same time that social services goal was to provide her a sense of safety, homelike environment.. Because of this concern, she was unable to move easily in this direction. Well, I have to think that my response eased her mind enough, because she certainly thrived with us, and, enjoyed our very multi-cultural home environment. But, another child may have been more adversely affected. I wonder how many workers would have explored this aspect of our environment if seeking to understand a poor quality placement experience. That, is, in part as aspect underlying this work. Maybe I should say, I have felt, from my work, that many people treat the discussion of religion much like they discuss the topic of sex. For example, in screening interviews for fostering, the licensing worker asks what the family's religious preference is, and then, the discussion is over. Yet, we all know that such a brief inquiry into one's religious affiliation is not capable of identifying the complexities of how one lives out their religious beliefs, and practices.

Agencies need to provide more clarity to foster parents/group home workers

Agencies that license and certify foster homes should take heed the foster parents are of the opinion that the issues of religion is not seen as adequately addressed by agencies. Only two states (Colorado and Minnesota) were seen as providing any adequate information around religion in screening and training.

Foster Children will usually be involved in Religious Activities

The pervasiveness of religious practices and beliefs as reported in these foster homes suggests that even when birth parents do not stipulate a preference for a specific religiously-affiliated foster home, the experience of the foster child will probably include practices and

education in a specific religious persuasion. This raises issues about how this practice and education will affect a family's reunification, and how the child will understand or identify with their family-of-origin if they incorporate the beliefs and values of the foster family.

Family and Religion as a Cross-cultural experience

For a foster child entering a new fostering home environment, it is likely that religious practices pervade the fostering family's environment. If we accept the perception of varied respondents who indicate that the foster children who come into their homes do not have any religious affiliation or regular practices, it appears that we should liken the placement of foster children into these pervasive religious environments as a cross-cultural experience. Borrowing from our knowledge regarding cross-cultural experiences, we can speculate that there is a need for the child to adjust to the differences and newness of the "foreign" culture. The child must adapt to a new cultural environment, learning the signs and symbols (including language) which are attributable to the "new" culture. We further know that when a culture is significantly different so as to challenge a person's established beliefs and values or appears to be or is threatening to the person, then it is possible that the person, in this case the child, may experience some level of "culture shock." When we consider foster children, this culture shock may sit in a parallel arrangement with other situations the foster child may be experiencing such as trauma--the trauma experienced when a child is removed from a dangerous situation, and then, further traumatized at the initiation of an out-of-home placement. We must consider how agencies and their caseworkers can better assess in the first days and weeks of the placement experience the influence of a foster home environment on the foster child, particularly where a strong religious environment exists.

Using a Minister to make Decisions

Even though foster homes may know that they are required to gain permission from the family-of-origin for specific rituals such as baptism, confirmation, etc., many foster parents seem satisfied if the child makes a decision about their religious commitment(s). It might be interpreted in these cases that foster parents are abdicating their responsibility and/or the agencies in some ways regarding responsibilities and decisions related to religious education and practices for the foster child. When decisions don't meet the beliefs or values of the foster family, then an outside party might be used. For example, foster parents might seek their minister to make a decision about a child's involvement in a religious activity.

Foster Children with Less known Religious Orientations

Interestingly, few foster parents recounted serious challenges or difficulties with foster children. The situations described by foster parents relate to children of non-Christian faiths. For example, one respondent recounts

"After her mother died, it was difficult to deal with the beliefs which were told the child because of the [American] Indian practices. She was told that her mother's things were to be burned or given away, or her mother would come back and get her. She had severe sleeping problems."

"A Vietnamese Buddhist child wanted to attend temple but there was none for 90 miles. She chose to stay home."

Foster Child Using Controlling Approach

A few foster parents addressed how foster children might use their choice to not attend church as a way of controlling the family. One respondent writes

"We try to give people choices of where they would like to go. If its not about the choice of where to go, but rather if we go they will receive consequences for trying to control the rest of the family. We have told foster children that they do not have to agree with us--they just have to go along with us. Sunday morning is a perfect time for a child to act out if there is something going on in their lives that they want to tell us, but haven't been able to. They know church is important to us, so it will be an easy time to pick a fight and get a response."

Example of Positive Effects of Religious Practice

The positive effects of religious practice are discussed more frequently than any adversities. As an example, one foster parent writes

> "Church was a very positive influence in their lives. One foster girl, who had never gone to church before [our home], has left our home but still calls regularly and tells us about the great need she has to go to church on Sundays. Church (actually more than just "church"--a relationship with Jesus Christ) has given them a reason to be good, moral, responsible citizens. Where else are they going to get it? Certainly not in their former homes and not in school!! These kids need someone that can tell them that there's a reason they shouldn't be doing drugs, having sex with everyone that they meet, and they should be respecting other's property."

Conclusions

Foster Children

When we have to remove abused and neglected children from their homes, our task is to provide safe, caring home environments for those children. This safe, caring environment however also includes more complex arrangements of daily life. Not unlike our boarding school approach of cultural genocide for the Native American child in years not so long ago, our

approach to foster care is one that often puts the child into a unfamiliar familial and social culture. For the child who ends up staying in this out-of-home environment for any length of time, the need for the child to conform to this familial culture becomes necessary. Foster children as "guests" has not been a notion used to describe the out-of-home fostering experience. Thus, the foster children adapts to the family's environment; and then, when moved to another foster home, adapts to that next familial environment too. We know from this work that a significant number of foster homes will not tolerate a foster child's non-involvement in the family's religious activities. Thus, at times foster children are re-moved when they do not conform to the religious orientation. And, this lack of adaptation often puts the child at-risk , they move to more and more restrictive rehabilitative environments.

This discussion has also addressed the positive value afforded children from religious affiliation, education, and involvement. Children certainly can and do gain from this experience in a foster or group home. We must recognize that how the foster home or group home organizes the foster child's experience is important. For example, for the foster child who has not been previously exposed to religious beliefs and practices, a foster home could provide different experiences with religious communities. Visiting different churches, synagogues, prayer circles etc. would be very interesting.

Foster Parents

From the foster parent perspective, we can conclude that these parents use their religious organizations as supports for moral development of foster children. Postured to provide the best for the foster child, their efforts include daily, weekly, and yearly religious activities. Foster parents want to be supported in all their efforts to support a foster child. Foster parents benefit when we provide opportunities for discussion of this issue of religion, spirituality and foster care work. And, laws and regulations need to be somewhat clear when

they become operationalized. Recognizing that there are varied avenues to achieve healthy development of social values and personal beliefs beyond religious organizations, social agencies and their workers do little to provide other options in this area.

Foster parents and religiously-organized group homes can minimize conflicts and misunderstandings if they would take a few steps such as (1) gaining greater clarity about the role of their religious beliefs and practices in helping children, (2) learning how they will be influenced in their parenting approach by their religious beliefs and practices, (3) providing clarity to the certifying agency about limits, requirements, and expectations related to religious involvement with foster children, and (4) thinking through in each case the role of religious involvement for the particular foster child they take into their home. As developed in our current training program, a written letter to the certifying agency with this information is very helpful for everyone. Working with the placement and on-going workers around each of these steps will enhance our work with children who find themselves in new, often strange familial environments.

Workers: Assessment, Placement, and Monitoring Activities

From this survey research presented along with the other experiences training workers and providers, the issue of religion and spirituality as aspects of caring for children in out-of-home facilities should be addressed. Assessment practices should examine how religion is or is not part of a child's life and how a different religious orientation may influence a foster child. At points where workers need to move a foster child the worker must consider how religious involvement in the current foster home has influenced the child, and how a new family may support or change that experience for the child. A former foster child recounted recently how she was in three different foster homes, with three different Christian orientations. She was told in the first home that she 'would go to Hell if she did not find G-D. In the second home, she was

told she was not the 'right kind' of believer. And, in the third home, she practiced again another religious orientation. As this person recounted this story, she had tears streaming down her face. I felt her confusion, her sadness, and her sense of vulnerability.

Issues for Reunification

When children are planning to return home, we must help birth parents address issues of religion as they were practiced in the foster home. There would be a great deal of value in learning how foster children view this issue in their placement experience. For example, in the story Rose, she relates how important it was that she got Baptized, even when her father was in disagreement. In her recollection, she says that the minister made the decision to baptize Rose over the father's objections.

Other opportunities to address religion by agencies: Training, Support Groups

Whether in a public or private foster care setting, most foster homes have regular religious practices in their home and within a religious community. Neither public or private agencies address the extensive religious involvement that foster children will receive in a foster home placement situation. Agencies responsible for placement and monitoring should provide opportunities to discuss the regular religious involvement of foster children in training programs, in-service support groups, or other types of regular contact with foster parents.

Future Research/Future Legal Issues

This study attempted to identify the extent of religious practices in foster homes. To some degree, this objective was achieved. Future research in this area should examine the impact on children in placement, the impact of families of origin, and ask how religious

practices' influences foster children's growth, development, and stability in the fostering situation.

Issues of the rights of birth families and of children to choose to practice and not practice a religious faith might be important questions for legal experts to pursue. There is not clarity about how to approach this area with the limited information written to date.

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